LEON POST
ZOEY GILES

8.21.26

ROMAN WALLS





OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

First of all (before you read further) if you don't know about the Roman Empire, you should probably do a quick Google search....Okay now that you're all caught up lets talk about the Roman Walls in Leon, Spain. The interesting thing about walls is not what they're made of but rather why they're there. I have walls in my bedroom because a very long time ago people built separate rooms and then doors for privacy, however, what about walls built in the middle of your home to keep some people in and some people out. This is what the Roman Empire did to expand; they killed, they took and they succeeded. Timeline wise, what would have been Spain fell pretty quickly. The walls were built because of Legio VII who was occupying what was Leon toward the end of the 1st century BC. The majority of the walls have been reconstructed, but some parts like the "water buckets" have been preserved, although only some parts of the wall are still original. Before I spit anymore historical facts, I should tell you this blog isn't that educational, although it's still informative about positionality, the tourist gaze and visibility.

While on my study abroad trip in Leon, I took 2 classes that really kicked my ass academically but taught me a lot. I learned about "gazes" which is the way we engage with the world that is shaped by our lived experiences as well as race, class and ethnicity. We also focused on positionality, which is what it sounds like: our positions in certain spaces. And finally, our visibility or invisibility in our environments. We learned some other stuff too but these concepts stuck with me the most.

My good friends John Urry and Jonas Larson collaborated on a book called "The Tourist Gaze" in which they talk about...the gazes of tourists.. Anyway " ' Bodies are not only written upon, but also write their own meanings and feelings upon space and a continual process of continual remaking.' " (Urry 2011, 11) I really liked this quote they chose because it's essentially saying that we make spaces our own through our own personal interactions and the space can change constantly. I felt this was relevant to the Roman walls because think about what they used to be, and what they are now. The people of Leon chose to keep them despite their violent and invasive history. Now it's for busy locals to walk past on their way to their lives and for tourists to take photos in front of. Its walls act as a path leading you around the city and the gates act as entrances into the plaza. We will all look at it differently, but we're all looking at the same structure. This is where the collective gaze that my two friends talk about in chapter 8 of their book. A large group of people taking photos of themselves and each other lets other people know this is the place to be as a tourist anyway (Urry 2011, 13). I really like the wall, I mean it was along my path every single day to my classes of the day and then back home. I tried to cosplay locally and not bat an eye when I saw it but each and every time I would look up. If I wasn't distracted by my many questions about the wall itself, I was focused on my feeling of belonging in Spain

As a Cuban American woman, it's not a surprise I don't feel exactly comfortable in the "motherland" . I crack constant jokes about Christopher Columbus and how he is an Italian-Spanish speaking psychopath and also Spain as a whole because of their history with my people. Another reason why I don't feel like I fit in is because of my outside. I don't fit any of their European beauty standards, here or back in the states. But this is quite literally Europe, so there's more pressure. It breeds resentment and when I walk past those walls every day on my way to school, I'm hyperfocused on everyone else and on myself. It feels like they know, I know that they know I don't belong here. My first fieldnote entry when I was here quite literally said "My initial impression that night was, I'm a stinky American who on average walks 4000 steps a day, and Spaniards dress well and smell even better." I still feel that way. Najat El Hachmi explained this feeling perfectly in "Foreign Daughter" where she essentially says that she focuses on other people's bodies and blames her genes for having to try so much harder to fit in. Except I'm really not trying to fit in, I would feel worse if I lost my individuality

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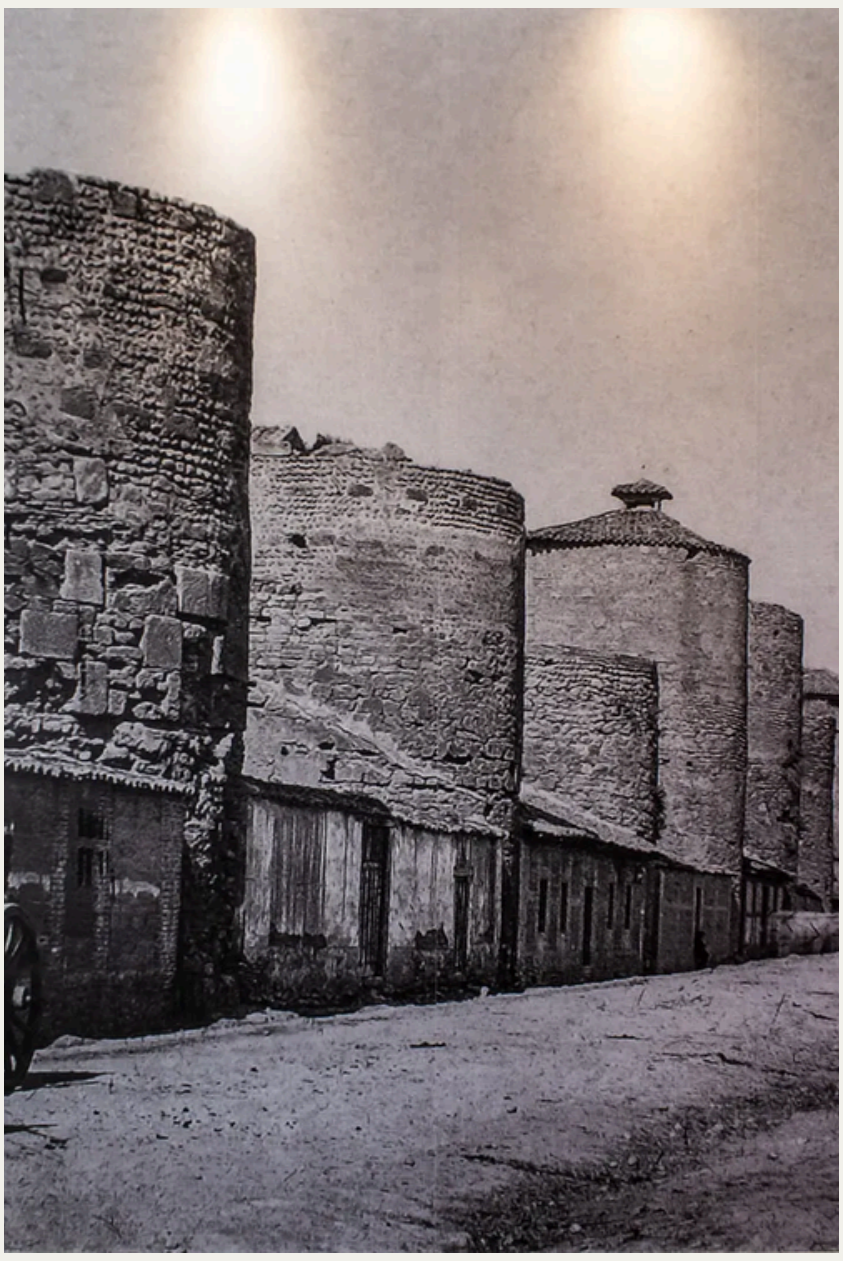

Besides my own insecurities being magnified under the walls, I also think about why the walls are still here. The walls have been reconstructed since 1C, the medieval walls built in front around 14C and they even extended the walls. These walls represent something more than proof the Romans came and conquered but their function is now preserved history for tourists to take selfies in front of. When I went to Salamanca our tour guide brought us to the Plaza that used to be the royal pavilion. I remember jotting this next part down. She said they have open medallions for “future history" to be chiseled in. The same medallions they honored conquerors and clergy men. I could not fathom this because one thing is keeping history alive in books, but honoring through statues? It was unsettling. Remember, I'm Cuban so I don't care for conquerors. I am very biased on this. “It's like someone thought that painting the ceiling with Aboriginal art and sticking a few palm trees in the corridor would help us feel at home and forget that everything in this place should be thousands of kilometers away from here. Including me.” (Wiener 2021, 1) .

Although I support certain monuments of terrible people in history being taken down and replaced by inspirational people, I can also see where Spaniards are coming from. It's important to their history, the good and the bad. I wonder how you all feel about it? Or maybe it depends on context. I need Europeans to tell me how they feel. I mean my whole goal of this blog post is to hear differences in opinions. Im quite receptive, even if i have strong opinions about certain europeans...

I really enjoyed typing out this blog. I mean, the research was not fun, but maybe that’s just me. Im sure this post is misleading; I mean, you would assume it’s a purely academic paper from the title but then I talk about things that seem unrelated but are not... for me anyway. I really enjoyed using informal language; it’s fun, and that’s why I chose this medium for my creative project for my final project in my study abroad program. I hope my professors giggle a little (and give me an A++++) A girl can dream right?